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ABSTRACT

Numerous studies have reported that school counselors often experience high levels of stress as part of their jobs. Much of this stress has been characterized as related to attempting to meet the many demands of the position as well as to performing many non-professional duties. This study examined burnout and job satisfaction among rural school counselors. The Maslach Burnout Inventory for Educators and the Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire, Short Form, were mailed to 214 western rural schools each having a single counselor. Materials were returned by 147 counselors representing a 68.6% rate of return. Scores for emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, personal accomplishment, general satisfaction, intrinsic satisfaction, and extrinsic satisfaction were computed from the two instruments. Appropriate descriptive statistics were computed and regression analysis performed. Counselors were found to exhibit moderate levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Personal accomplishment scores were high, indicative of low burnout in this area. Job satisfaction scores compared to appropriate norm groups indicated a lower level of job satisfaction. Moderate negative correlations resulted between the emotional exhaustion and depersonalization subscales of the burnout measure and the measures of job satisfaction. Moderate positive correlations were noted between personal accomplishment and the measures of job satisfaction. (ABL)

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A Study of Burnout and Job Satisfaction among Rural School Counselors

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A Study of Burnout and Job Satisfaction among Rural School Counselors

Numerous studies have reported that school counselors often experience high levels of stress as part of their jobs. Much of this stress has been characterized as related to attempting to meet the many demands of the position as well as to performing many non-professional duties (Olson & Dilley, 1988). The rural small school environment is often unique in that counselors must meet diverse needs with few contacts with other counseling professionals. The purpose of this study was to examine the levels of burnout and job satisfaction among school counselors who work in small isolated rural schools.

Recently there has been increasing awareness of the uniqueness of the rural environment and its impact upon educators. The term rural has many definitions and it may not be possible to find one definition that describes all of what is ultimately labeled rural education. Helge (1983) utilized a 3-dimensional approach that included topography, population density, and other community and district variables. These were administrative structure, ethnic groups represented, major religions, average age of residents and degree to which there is collaboration with other agencies. A two-factor model (Pladson & Lemon, 1982) defined rural in terms of distance from urban centers and school enrollment. Whatever definition(s) of rural are utilized, small rural schools enroll in excess of 10 million students (Arends, 1987).

Rural settings have been characterized as offering a unique way of life. Rural life is seen to have certain "strengths" that are unique. These include a lack of boundaries between what belongs in school and in the community, a slower pace, and a sense of independence and self-reliance. On the other hand

"weaknesses" often revolve around financial concerns and lack of professional resources resulting from the isolation and distance from urban centers. Lack of population results in a weaker tax base, higher cost for services, and out migration due to lack of opportunities. The contrast between the strengths and weaknesses could be seen as a source of stress.

Burnout is a continuous variable comprising emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment failure. Job satisfaction is defined as the degree to which employees have a positive affective orientation toward employment by the organization. Rural communities have different characteristics and different needs. Rural schools usually have closer ties to the local community and to traditional values. Staffs can be a mix of long tenured locals and outsiders working their way up in the profession (Nachtigal, 1982). Small rural schools have typically been hard hit by declining enrollments, limited resources, and increasing demands for accountability. School counselors are often the only counseling professionals working in the school (Sutton & Southworth, 1990). These challenges, the isolation, and the concomitant lack of other counselors for consultation can be seen as possible stressors.

Studies have indicated that school counselors may experience a degree of burnout. Sears and Navin (1983) found 65% of counselors in their study reporting school counseling to be moderately or very stressful. The primary sources of this stress reflected the themes of quantitative overload, role conflict, and role ambiguity. Moracco, Butcke, and McEwen (1984) in a nationwide study concurred, reporting role ambiguity, role conflict, and task overload as significant sources of stress for school counselors. Counselors were concerned about being asked to perform many non-professional duties, to

make decisions without proper planning, and to perform tasks in a limited amount of time. Hutchinson, Barrick, and Groves (1986) also found counselors reporting role overload as a result of time consuming non-counseling duties.

Pierson-Hubeny and Archambault (1987) investigated differences in role stress and burnout for school psychologists and four other educator groups including school counselors, teachers, school social workers, and reading specialists. School counselors reported the second highest level of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization as measured by the Maslach Burnout Inventory. Counselors reported the highest level of role conflict and second highest level of role ambiguity. Only classroom teachers reported higher levels for these variables.

Researchers studying counseling-related occupations (eg. Cherniss, 1980; Farber, 1984; Maslach & Pines, 1977) have also pointed to connections between reported burnout, role conflict, role ambiguity, and role overload as well as lack of job satisfaction. Ursprung (1986) in summarizing the research on burnout in human services workers stated that research strongly indicated the importance of the connection between role perceptions and burnout.

Olson and Dilley (1988) reviewing much of the research to date concerning school counselors underscored this connection between role stresses and burnout. They stated that there is substantial evidence to support school counselor assertions that they cannot meet all the demands placed on them. These demands become a source of stress and affect the mental health and quality of work performed by school counselors.

Method

Instruments

The Maslach Burnout Inventory for Educators (MBI) (Maslach & Jackson, 1986) was designed to be utilized with educators and to measures the three aspects of the burnout syndrome. The emotional exhaustion subscale assesses the feelings of being emotionally overextended and exhausted by one's work. An unfeeling and impersonal response towards one's service or instruction is measured by the depersonalization subscale. The personal accomplishment subscale assesses feelings of competence and successful achievement. As correlations between the subscales are low, they are considered independent of one another and computation of an overall burnout score is discouraged. The authors emphasized that the instrument is as yet research oriented and should not be utilized as an instrument for individual diagnosis of the burnout syndrome. Bodden (1985) concurred in this assessment but stated that the instrument appears to be the best available for operationalizing the burnout construct.

Reliability estimates are Cronbach alpha estimates of .90 for emotional exhaustion, .76 for depersonalization, and .76 for personal accomplishment. Maslach and Jackson (1986) stated that substantial evidence is available for the validity of the MBI. Convergent validity was demonstrated through correlations with measures of outcomes hypothesized to be related to burnout and job characteristics expected to contribute. Discriminant validity has been demonstration by low correlations with measures of other psychological constructs presumed to be confounded with burnout.

The Minnesota Satisfaction Questionnaire, Short Form (MSQ) (Weiss, Dawis, England, & Lofquist, 1967) was developed from the long form of the same instrument. The MSQ is based on the work adjustment model which proposed that job satisfaction is a function of the correspondence between the individual's

vocational needs and the reinforcement in the work environment. The short form contains the 20 questions making up the general satisfaction subscale of the longer form. An intrinsic and an extrinsic subscale can also be calculated. Reliability coefficients are .90 for general satisfaction, .86 for intrinsic satisfaction and .80 for extrinsic satisfaction. Validity evidence is in the form of construct and discriminant validity.

Participants

The instruments were mailed to 214 schools having a single counselor. The schools were located in three rural western states. The MBI included an Educators Demographic Data Sheet designed to collect data theoretically related to the burnout construct. Materials were returned by 147 school counselors representing a 68.6% rate of return. The study included 87 women and 60 men. Mean age was 41.6 with 17.6 years of experience in education. Average number of students was 280 and grade levels ranged equally over elementary and secondary. The majority held a masters degree (76), significant numbers (46) indicated Masters +30, and only 4 just the BA. Scores for emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, personal accomplishment, general satisfaction, intrinsic satisfaction, and extrinsic satisfaction were computed from the two instruments. Appropriate descriptive statistics were computed and regression analysis performed.

Results

In addition to the demographic variables reported above, other aspects such as ethnicity, religious orientation, and marital status were reflected on the data sheet. The entire sample was caucasian. Religious affiliation reported was 65% protestant, and 24% catholic. Mean intensity of religious belief was 3.19 on a scale where 1 represented very religious and 7 not at all

religious. Long standing intact marriages were typical of the sample. Currently married represented 123 respondents. Mean length of marriage was 17.6 years and 1.2 children lived at home.

Counselors were found to exhibit moderate levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization. Personal accomplishment was high, indicative of low burnout in this area. Job satisfaction scores compared to appropriate norm groups indicated a lower level of job satisfaction. Counselors in this study scored in the 35th percentile for general satisfaction.

Moderate negative correlations resulted between the emotional exhaustion and depersonalization subscales of the burnout measure and the measures of job satisfaction. Moderate positive correlations were noted between personal accomplishment and the measures of job satisfaction. These relationships were in the expected directions.

Regression equations were computed for each of the subscales using the demographic information provided by the MBI as independent variables. Number of students contributed to the emotional exhaustion subscale (beta=.225, t=2.19, p=.03). The greater number of students indicated higher levels of emotional exhaustion among the counselors. Degree was a predictor of the depersonalization scale (beta=-.215, t=-2.09, p=.039). Thus depersonalization scores were higher for lower degree levels. Remaining equations for personal accomplishment and for the measures of job satisfaction were non-significant.

Discussion

How burned out are school counselors? The rural environment may provide a unique set of stressors, and supports. Counselors in this study were

experiencing moderate levels of both emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, aspects of the burnout syndrome that could impact on relations with parents, teachers and students. Levels of personal accomplishment were high, which may be a moderator. However, job satisfaction was reported as relatively lower. Regression analyses did not indicate strong predictors of either the burnout syndrome or job satisfaction. The Demographic Data Sheet may not have provided enough variables unique to the rural environment.

However these variables are interesting related to the rural environment. The counselors in this study were experienced and well educated. These levels, especially the education variable, may indicate some dissatisfaction between what counselors know could be and what is especially concerning the performance of non-professional duties. Counselors indicated a level of acceptance of such rural values as family life and religious orientation. The high levels of intact family life and religious intensity may help explain the reported feelings of personal accomplishment while reporting some dissatisfaction with aspects of the job.

Comments provided by counselors may indicate that the diversity of functions (role overload) may be significant predictors. Counselors reported the interference of non-counseling duties and substitute teaching. One counselor remarked that a small school counselor wears many hats and needs more skills. A theme encountered in several comments was a level of frustration, but feelings of accomplishment:

> I find the role as counselor very dynamic. It becomes overwhelming in the face of the incredible family and personal dilemmas we face with today's youth. I am resentful of the many roles and the vast

misunderstandings that perpetuate in the staff, community, and professional world.

This study was exploratory in the sense of providing information about counselors in isolated rural environments. As some definition of rural applies to many schools, such studies are needed. Future research can focus on the relationship of the unique aspects of the rural environment to burnout and job satisfaction. Also of importance are how various levels impact on relationships, on longevity in the profession and on personal coping mechanisms.

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